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ABSTRACT

This report provides a brief review of literature on at-risk students and implications for a study being conducted by the Pacific Region Educational Laboratory (PREL). The study aims to identify factors that put students at-risk of failure within the present system of public high schools in the Pacific region. Although numerous studies present a broad picture of factors related to at-risk youth, few address the student population of the Pacific region. PREL is a nonprofit organization concerned with educational research and improvement for children in American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Hawaii, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. After reviewing selected literature, the research team identified at-risk students as being enrolled in grades 9-12 of a public high school in the Pacific region and having failed one or more courses in the fall semester of the 1993-94 school year. Because of the diversity of students in this region, the research team proposed an extensive study of more than 500 student, school, home, and community factors that might affect student success and failure. A set of six instruments was developed for use with students, teachers, parents, principals, school records, and community leaders. So far, data have been gathered on more than 350 students. The analysis of the research data should offer insights to educators, policymakers, and communities on common areas to focus improvements, reform, and program development. (LP)

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Research Review for the Study of Pacific At-Risk Factors

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Introduction

As elsewhere, some students in the Pacific region are not experiencing success in school. The National Goals for Education (1990) say, in part, "Educators must be given greater flexibility to devise challenging and inspiring strategies to serve the needs of a diverse body of students. This is especially important for students who are at risk of academic failure—for the failure of these students will become the failure of our nation." This goal is consistent with the belief that schools can make a difference. The need for new strategies is also consistent with the primary reasons cited by dropouts in 1992 for leaving school: not liking school, failing school, and feeling unable to keep up with schoolwork (Gronlund, 1993).

In the Pacific region, as in the mainland United States, risk of academic failure is a high priority issue for educators and communities. Policymakers, educators, students, parents, and communities express increased concern for at-risk youth in the schools of the Pacific region. The ten entities of the Pacific region served by the Pacific Region Educational Laboratory (PREL) — American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Yap), Guam, Hawaii, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau—have diverse student populations in terms of demographic factors, including overall number, ethnicity, language, proportion of immigrant students, and gender.

The school systems serving these students vary in their abilities to accommodate all of the high school age population, maintain accurate student records, provide certified teachers, offer broad and culturally relevant curricula, and enhance opportunities for community and parent involvement. Homes and families vary from extended families to single parent households. The communities' expectations of appropriate roles for students, teachers, and parents also vary with cultural contexts. Within this milieu, students' lack of success in the schools is a growing concern.

In order to assist schools and communities in addressing the needs of their students, PREL is conducting a study to identify factors that put students at risk of failure within the present system of public high schools in the region. The PREL at-risk study will profile at-risk factors for island and immigrant Pacific youth. Specifically, the study is designed to identify the unique factors that affect at-risk high school students in the Pacific, and to promote an awareness and understanding of these students, as well as suggest approaches to improve their education.

Concern for the well-being of the whole child underlies this work. Academic success is not considered the only measure of an individual's success but comprises one facet of personal development directly related to the influence of educators. The designation of a student at-risk does not indicate that the child is a failure in all aspects of life but rather that there is an indication that parents, educators, and administrators need to assist the student. That assistance may focus on education and support services that are needed to maximize the student's full potential as a contributing member of society.

The study is being conducted by the PREL Research and Development (R & D) Cadre. This group is com-

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posed of one representative from each of the entities' departments of education, two from postsecondary institutions in the region, one private school representative, and a representative from the national government of the Federated States of Micronesia. While conducting the research, R & D Cadre members also receive assistance from local support groups that include school counselors, central office staff, principals, teachers, and educational administrators.

The R & D Cadre began its work by reading other research in the field. This synthesis will provide a brief review of the literature on at-risk students considered by the Cadre, relate it to the absence of definitive findings for the Pacific, and present the research questions developed by the Cadre.

Review of the Literature

The Concept of At-risk Students

In conducting the review of the research, the first step was to develop an understanding of the term "at-risk students." As the focus of this investigation, we promoted the perspective that "at risk" is a descriptive term referring to the total educational context in which students operate, rather than a negative reflection primarily of the student.

One definition of "at-riskness" is a student who is "in danger of failing to complete his or her education with an adequate level of skills" (Slavin & Madden, 1989). An enormous body of information about students "at-risk" is present in the educational literature, beginning with the traditional approach of studying student dropouts (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Castello & Young, 1988; Natriello, Pallas, & McDill, 1986) and alienated youth (Pellicano, 1987) and moving toward the more recent emphasis on changes in policy and practice that enhance students' chances to succeed (Hendrick, MacMillan, Balow, & Hough, 1989). The earlier emphasis was on studying the correlates to dropouts—to focus on social decay as both the cause of alienation and the barrier preventing school success in dealing with the dropout. Institutions rationalized their plight something like this: it is not the school's fault that some students come from poor homes and community environments, and lack the motivation and academic talent to succeed; the schools are unable to solve these socioeconomic determinants and are therefore not responsible for the fact that a sizable portion of their clients find good reasons to leave before graduation.

Presseisen (1988) described the term "at risk" as originating from a medical model in which it was used as part of the phrase "at risk of something." An example is a student at risk of dropping out of school. The term implies that there is a threatening condition surrounding these students, and that the condition is not necessarily inherent in the students. This perspective allows for interventions to reduce some of the threat and thereby increase the students' chances of avoiding the condition. The author describes groups often included in the "at-risk" category as including ethnic minorities, male students, students of low socioeconomic status, and students suffering from various forms of stress or instability. These student groups seem to encompass a number of problems related to quality and appropriateness of educational services, meaninglessness of instruction, family and community instability, and academic and school distinctions.

Richard A. McCann (1988) provides four means of approaching the definition of at-risk students, including characteristics of the individual, environmental conditions, students' ability to meet educational standards, and students' behaviors indicating their inability to assume responsible adult roles. These descriptors focus on negative behaviors and conditions. McCann asserts that the outcome of not addressing these negative factors will be a citizenry of unproductive members of society.

After reviewing selected literature on at-risk factors and definitions, the R & D Cadre agreed to the following definition of at-risk students for the purposes of their study:

> An at-risk student is one who is in danger of failing to complete his or her education with adequate skills, knowledge, and attitudes to function as a responsible citizen of his or her community. For practical purposes of identifying students for this study, an at-risk student is identified as a student who failed one or more courses in the Fall semester of the 1993-94 school year and was in grades 9 -1 2 of a public high school in the Pacific region.

Variables Related to Students' At-Risk Status

Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1986) used the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) High School and Beyond database to look at "Who drops out of high school and why?" They found that the two background factors most strongly related to dropping out of school are socioeconomic status (SES) and race/ethnicity. Black-Americans and Hispanics were the ethnic groups identified in this study as potential dropouts. Other factors included single-parent families, large families, and living in the South (USA) or in a large city. Academic failure was consistently related to dropping out and students who dropped out have been shown to be dissatisfied with school and have lower self-esteem.

In an earlier study, Rumberger (1983) identified factors leading to students' decisions to drop out of school. The pur-

pose of the study was to see how family background operates as a factor related to dropping out of school for students of different ethnic groups and gender. It found that students from low socioeconomic status (SES) were more likely to drop out than those of high SES. Young female students were highly influenced by their mother's educational level and male students by their father's level of education. At the time of the study, most females left school due to pregnancy and to marry, and males left school to go to work. Family background factors, including parents' level of education and the social status of the family, were found to be powerful predictors of dropping out. The author speculates that students from families with low social status may have a greater tendency to leave school to help support their families. Thus family background was found to be a significant factor in predicting dropping out of school.

Although these studies present a broad picture of factors related to at-risk youth, they do not address the specific population of the Pacific region. Many of the region's students are ethnic minorities from lower income families within rapidly changing life styles, social and economic structures, and cultures. In an article more relevant to the Pacific, Ainsley, Forman, and Sheret (1991) describe a study of high school factors that influence students to remain in school in New South Wales, Australia. In addition to the effects of socioeconomic status, gender, and being non-English first language speakers, they identified two intervening variables—student achievement level and student's perception of the quality of school life. They indicate that promising avenues to investigate include the school-related factors of curriculum innovations, school organization, student achievement, and attitude toward school.

In a study sponsored by the World Bank, Bruce Fuller investigated school factors that raise achievement in the Third World (1987). Fuller suggests that, "school institutions exert a greater influence on achievement within developing countries compared to industrialized nations, after accounting for the effect of pupil background." His perspective for the review was to look at "how material ingredients are mobilized and organized within schools and classrooms." The school factors reviewed were school expenditures, specific material inputs, teacher quality, teaching practices, classroom organization, and school management. The two key issues raised are 1) the greater influence of schools on student achievement in developing nations, and 2) how material inputs actually are "managed and what skills teachers draw upon to strengthen the social structure of the classroom."

For the purposes of the R & D Cadre's study, the most informative work was Koki's study, "The Children and Youth At-Risk Effort in Hawaii" (1987). Koki outlines academic, psychological, and social-behavioral indicators of at-risk students in Hawaii. Hawaii's at-risk students included: those with limited English proficiency, underachievers, the intellectually limited, the economically disadvantaged, the malnourished, substance abusers, dropouts and potential dropouts, those retained for one or more years, pregnant teens or teens with children, those from unstable homes, the abused and neglected, the psychologically impaired, those who threaten or attempt suicide, juvenile delinquents, and the "silent ones" or withdrawn, alienated youth. The study reviews a number of intervention programs aimed at students with these characteristics.

The Pacific At-Risk Study

The review of the literature led to the identification of factors to be investigated in the PREL at-risk study. The region included in this study represents diverse cultures, languages, socioeconomic levels, and school expenditure levels. In order to account for the differences inherent in these entities, and to identify factors most associated with at-riskness in public high school students, the Cadre focused on four broad domains: the student, home, school, and community. Selection of these domains arose from a model of student performance described by Alesia Montgomery and Robert Rossi (1993) who wrote, "A student's personal, home, community, and school characteristics should not be studied in isolation—all these variables contribute to student performance, and they are strongly interactive." This model encompasses the previously reviewed research from the US mainland, Hawaii, Australia, and developing nations.

Due to the diversity of the Pacific region, a simple study of a limited number of variables was deemed inappropriate. Rather, an extensive study of more than 500 variables related to student success and failure in the public high schools of the Pacific region was undertaken.

The primary research questions are: What are the factors that cause students to fail in the public schools of the Pacific region? What are the factors within the schools, homes, and communities that relate to students' success or failure? To answer these questions, the R & D Cadre developed a set of six instruments to be used with students, teachers, parents, principals, school records, and community leaders. Data has been gathered on some 350 students. The analysis of the research data should offer insights to educators, policymakers, and communities on common areas to focus improvements, reform, and program development.

The R & D Cadre adheres to the body of literature that starts with the assumption that schools can make a difference. Hendrick, MacMillan, Balow, & Hough (1989) provide a summary statement of this position: "Even though one cannot pinpoint the best intervention for a particular group of students there are a number of general school strategies

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that have been shown to be successful in retaining students. Indeed, one characteristic of the literature on intervention strategies is that almost everything seems to work when enthusiastic and engaged principals and teachers become committed to a specific course of action."

Research on at-risk factors for youth in American inner-cities, for example, is not likely to engage the commitment of Pacific communities. However, the R & D Cadre's identification of the factors that place Pacific public high school students at-risk can lead to greater and tighter connections of relationships and support between schools, homes, and communities. It can also provide options for the student's community to redefine the scope of responsibilities of schools and its support and services to provide enduring systemic change to better serve all of the students.

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